

Marienville ATV Connector and Wetland Restoration Project Scoping Document



Photo of the motor bike/snowmobile bridge over Blue Jay Creek. Photo by Curt Bowley, Recreation Technician.



Forest Service

Allegheny
National Forest

Forest County,
Pennsylvania

November
2019



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OVERVIEW

The Forest Service, Allegheny National Forest, is proposing to construct approximately 12.8 miles of two-way All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) trail and restore/enhance an adjacent wetland in Jenks and Howe Townships, Forest County, Pennsylvania. With the designation of approximately 5.1 miles of Township Road 356 (Greeley Farm Road) as a dual use road by Jenks Township, this project would establish a 17.9-mile connector that provides access from the village center of Marienville, Pennsylvania to the Marienville/Timberline ATV/Bike Trail system. If you would like to comment on this project before a decision is made, please submit your comments by December 20, 2019.

A summary of the activities proposed in this project is provided below. Locations are identified on the attached map, and additional information is available upon request or on our website at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52264.

BACKGROUND

The development of this proposed action is complementary to a comprehensive plan by Jenks Township to establish a multi-purpose trail hub and visitor center in the village of Marienville. Jenks Township has been working through multiple grants to revitalize the center of the village of Marienville with a restored railroad depot as a visitor center, direct access the village to multiple trails that utilize public lands, parking for a variety of trail users with access to services available in the village, and community gardens and other amenities.

The Forest Service recognizes the potential economic benefits to Jenks Township and the direct benefits to the public seeking information and access to the recreation opportunities on the Allegheny National Forest.

- With their plan, Jenks Township can establish a direct link from the village center of Marienville to the Knox Kane Rail Trail corridor that could provide four season access to hikers, bicyclists, equestrian users, and cross-country skiers along an improved trail route that stretches for 72 miles through four counties.
- Snowmobilers could access the 75-mile long Allegheny Snowmobile Loop directly from the village center, as well as use the Knox Kane Rail Trail to access the Allegheny Snowmobile Trail 12 (Goat Farm Road).
- Hikers could use the Knox Kane Rail Trail to access the North Country National Scenic Hiking Trail at the State Route 66 Trailhead approximately 5.8 miles south of the village center.
- Equestrian users could access the Spring Creek Horse Trail from the village center using Forest Road 130 (Lamonaville Road) to a trailhead 6 miles to the east. Equestrians could also directly access the Knox Kane Rail Trail from the village center.
- Equestrian users and hikers could also access the Buzzard Swamp Wildlife Management Area trail system using FR 130 (Lamonaville Road) from the village center.

A missing connection for the Jenks Township plan is access to the ATV/ Off-Highway Motorcycle (OHM) trail network on the Allegheny National Forest. OHM users with street legal vehicles can ride from the village center to the Penoke OHM Trailhead using State Route 66. However, for ATV users there is no direct way to access the Penoke, Marienville, or Timberline trails from the village center.

To facilitate such a connection, Jenks Township proposed to allow ATV use on Township Road 356 (Greeley Farm Road) from the village into the Allegheny National Forest, but only if the Forest Service would consider a connecting route from Greeley Farm Road to one of the ATV trailheads. To recognize the cooperative approach of Jenks Township and to work collaboratively with the township, as a key partner in their plan for a trail hub, the Forest Service agreed to explore this option and, if feasible, develop a proposal to facilitate a connecting route.

Working collaboratively with Jenks Township, the Forest Service recognizes that the township's vision mirrors goals identified in Allegheny National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (or Forest Plan):

- *Provide a diverse range of high quality, sustainable recreation opportunities consistent with public demand and resource capability emphasizing locally popular recreation places and those important to the tourism industry (page 13).*
- *Cooperate with the Commonwealth in the promotion and development of recreation opportunities associated with the Pennsylvania Wilds program (page 13).* The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has been a key financial contributor to the Knox Kane Rail Trail and the annual maintenance and improvement of the ATV/OHM and snowmobile trail networks on the Allegheny National Forest.
- *Emphasize the development of a mapped, marked, and maintained trail system to minimize user conflicts, impacts to natural resources, respond to changing social needs, and increase access and linkages to communities, forest recreation sites, and special features (page 13).*
- *Manage the trail system to support a wide variety of recreation opportunities and settings (page 13).*

The initial parameter for the Forest Service in considering the feasibility of a connecting route from Greeley Farm Road to the ATV/OHM trail network was that it had to be within a Forest Plan intensive use area. One of the key decisions of the Forest Plan was to “determine what uses and management activities are appropriate in what parts of the forest (page 29).” If the Forest Plan determined that a use is appropriate to consider in a particular area of the Allegheny National Forest, then that is referred to as a “suitable use” for that area. If it is not appropriate, then it is referred to as “unsuitable use” for that area. In the case of ATV/OHM use, the Forest Plan considered a number of parameters in determining suitability, including soils, conflicts with other uses, and impacts to habitat, water or wetlands. The Forest Plan identified areas suitable for ATV/OHM trails as “intensive use areas” and designated four such areas on the Allegheny National Forest (page ROD-21). The Forest Plan further states that “ATV/OHM trails are suitable only within intensive use areas (page 30)”.

In assessing the feasibility of a connecting route from Greeley Farm Road to the ATV/OHM trail

network, the Forest Service determined that such a route could be established completely within the Bluejay/Duhring Intensive Use Area. This intensive use area includes the Penoke OHM and Marienville ATV Trails.

The Forest Plan also states that a use or activity identified as suitable for an area does not permit the unlimited or unrestricted occurrence of the use or activity. In many cases, the use or activity is limited or restricted by either forest-wide or management area standards and guidelines. A suitable use “may also be limited by direction in the Forest Service directive system or through standard operating procedures.” And suitability does not mean that the use or activity may occur unconditionally, with a site-specific analysis often “required before the use or activity may occur (page 30)”.

With these additional considerations in mind, the Forest Service, having determined that a connecting route could occur entirely within an intensive use area, identified criteria that would be utilized in determining if such a route was feasible. Key considerations are summarized below in table 1.

Table 1: Key considerations

Subject	Considerations
Trail Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The route should begin at a new designated trailhead on National Forest land accessible using the Greeley Farm Road. 2. The route should be wide enough to accommodate two-way traffic since it is intended to connect two points (Greeley Farm Road trailhead and an ATV/OHM trailhead). The maximum width of an ATV using this route would be 64 inches, and trail location and design would take that into account. 3. The route should not introduce dual-use of ATV/OHMs and motor vehicles on an open Forest Service road (except to intersect and/or cross a road at a perpendicular angle with safe sight distance). 4. The route should use as little of the Penoke OHM Trail as possible. The Penoke OHM Trail is limited to machines 50” wide or less. It was designed to accommodate one-way off-highway motorcycle use, primarily on a single-track trail. The Penoke Trail is one of only two trails on public lands in Pennsylvania designated specifically for OHM use, and this design criteria is intended to maintain that specific use. 5. The route should utilize as much existing road and trail as possible and minimize the amount of new trail needed to establish the connection. 6. The Forest Service would not be closing any roads that are currently managed as open to the public in order to accommodate a new trail. The Forest Service would restrict seasonally any roads that are currently managed as open to the public in order to accommodate the proposed trail. 7. The Forest Service would not impact designated non-motorized trails. Existing trails proposed for the connecting route should currently be used for motorized recreation. 8. Access to the ATV/OHM trail network should be at an established trailhead. Options within the intensive use area include Penoke Trailhead (Forest Road 521), Rocket John Trailhead (Forest Road 395) and the Marienville Trailhead (Forest Road 225). 9. Any trail segment crossing State Routes 66 or 1003 (Blue Jay Road) should occur at an existing or new road crossing that meets PennDOT safety standards (adequate sight distance and adequate start/stop position). 10. Where appropriate, gates would be used to manage access to the trail system and would be positioned in a way that the trail system can be isolated during those times when it would not be open to the public.

Table 1: Key considerations

Subject	Considerations
Resource Impacts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proposed new trail or existing road segments should minimize stream crossings and/or use established stream crossings. 2. Proposed new trail segments should avoid impacts to endangered or threatened species, Regional Forester sensitive species, and eligible or potentially eligible heritage sites. 3. Proposed new trail segments and existing road segments should occur primarily on upland sites with well drained soils. Where that is not possible, design criteria should assure no negative impacts or the improvement of any existing negative impacts.
Additional Considerations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The connecting route from Greeley Farm Road to an ATV/OHM trailhead would only be open during the normal operating period for the ATV/OHM trail network. Jenks Township could put more restrictive operating conditions on the route from the village center to the Greeley Farm Trailhead. 2. Public ATV/OHM use of the connecting route would only be allowed for machines with a valid Allegheny National Forest ATV/OHM operating permit.

Utilizing these design criteria, the Forest Service developed options for a connecting route and, after initial analysis, decided on a proposed connecting route. To request public input on this proposed route, the Forest Service held two open houses for the general public that provided an opportunity to describe the objectives for the Forest Service and Jenks Township, as well as the proposed route; and engaged participants in discussion to solicit constructive feedback. These open houses were held at the Marienville Ranger District office on November 29, 2017 (attended by 57 registered participants), and December 6, 2017 (attended by 12 registered participants).

The participants in these meetings were mostly ATV enthusiasts who expressed general support for an ATV connector and specific support for the proposed route. The proposed route did include the use of roads through the area known as the Seldom Seen Recreation Residences. These seasonal residences are under special use permits on National Forest System lands. Some of the residents, who lease those sites from the Forest Service, expressed strong opposition to an ATV route that used the roads accessing the seasonal camps. As a result of the feedback from these meetings, the Forest Service modified the proposed route to by-pass the Seldom Seen Recreation Residences.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Allegheny National Forest provides 108 miles of ATV/OHM trail riding opportunities. By providing a trail connection from the village center of Marienville, Pennsylvania to the Marienville ATV Trailhead, this project would “increase access and linkages to communities” and would increase the variety of recreational opportunities and settings within the Allegheny National Forest (Forest Plan, page 13).

The proposed ATV connector trail would cross a wetland that lacks habitat diversity utilizing an abandoned railroad grade. There is an opportunity to improve the wetland by creating vernal pools, installing water diversion structures, if needed, in the abandoned railroad grade, and planting native wetland species to increase habitat diversity.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service is proposing to construct and authorize ATV use on a 12.8-mile route that would connect a new trailhead on the Greeley Farm Road in Jenks Township, Forest County with the Marienville ATV Trailhead, which is located approximately 10 miles northeast of the village of Marienville in Howe Township, Forest County. This would be accomplished through the activities listed in table 2 and show on the attached map.

Table 2: Summary of the proposed action

Trail Construction and Related Activities			
Activity	Amount	Details	
New trail construction	4.1 miles		
New perennial stream crossings	2 crossings	Watson Branch, Spring Creek – bridge Unnamed tributary to Watson Branch, Spring Creek - structural plate arch or bridge	
New intermittent stream crossings	4 crossings	Unnamed tributaries to Watson Branch, Spring Creek – squashed metal culverts	
New wetland crossing	1 crossing	Utilize an existing embankment to cross through a wetland. Install water diversion structures, if needed, to facilitate water movement through the embankment.	
New trailhead construction	0.5 acres	5 to 10-vehicle trailhead (off Greeley Farm Road, Township Road 356).	
Authorizing ATV use on existing roads	6.1 miles	Portions for Forest Roads 128F, 221, 221Ba, 287G, and 394 and 0.8 miles of non-system road.	
Authorizing ATV use on existing trails and abandoned railroad grades	2.6 miles	Authorize ATV use on 2.6 miles of existing ATV/OHM/snowmobile trail.	
Trail realignment	0.5 miles	0.5 miles of trail just west of State Route 1003 (Blue Jay Road) to provide for a safe road crossing and flow of traffic onto and off of the Marienville Bike Trail.	
High quality trail surfacing	4.2 miles	Road or Trail	Miles
		Forest Road 221BA	0.1
		Forest Road 221	1.1
		Forest Road 394	0.3
		Existing non-system road (NS027693)	0.2
		Marienville Bike and Snowmobile Trails	1.4
		New trail construction	1.1

Gate Installation and Relocation Activities						
Activity	Amount	Details				
New Gate Installation Gate Relocation	11 gates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jenks Township Road 358 (2 gates on ATV trail at/near intersection with township road)Howe Township Road 373 (2 gates on ATV trail at/near intersection with township road)State Route 66 (2 gates on ATV trail at/near intersection with state road)Forest Road 221 (Milepost 1.540)State Route 1003 (Bluejay Road) (1 gate on ATV trail west of intersection with state road 1003)Forest Road 394 (Mileposts 0.549 and 1.875) (install gates on ATV trail at intersection with forest road at listed mileposts)Forest Road 221 (west of intersection with state road 1003), which would result in restricting access to 1.635 miles of Forest Roads 221 and 221C that are currently open to public motor vehicle use.				
Road Management Changes and Decommissioning Activities						
Activity	Amount	Details				
Road Management Changes	3.0 miles	Road Number	Existing Status	Proposed Status	Miles	From Milepost to Milepost
		221	Open	Restricted	1.490	2.849 to 4.339
		221C	Open	Restricted	0.145	0.0 to 0.145
		128F	Closed	Restricted	0.503	0.222 to 0.725
		221BA	Closed	Restricted	0.539	0.0 to 0.539
		287G	Closed	Restricted	0.158	0.0 to 0.158
	222	Restricted	Closed	0.126	5.145 to 5.271	
Road Decommissioning	0.1 mile	Approximately 0.126 miles of Forest Road 222 would be decommissioned to remove it from the forest road system. This is primarily an administrative measure, as this segment of Forest Road 222 is not drivable. At one time, this segment crossed Slater Run, but the crossing was removed many years ago. As this segment connects to Forest Road 221, additional measures will be taken to assure this does not appear as a travel route for ATV/OHM users on Forest Road 221.				
Watershed Improvement Activities						
Activity	Amount	Details				
Vernal Pool Construction	5 pools	Construct five small vernal pools that range in size from 13 feet x 15 feet to 15 feet x 25 feet and are up to 18 inches deep. Two of the pools would be placed next to natural pools created from the uprooting of trees. The root wad next to the pools provides structure for amphibians to crawl on. The three other vernal pools would be constructed throughout and near one another within the wetland.				
Install water diversion structures	As needed	These will be installed as needed based on trail slope and water flow. They could be round cross drains pipes or an armored rolling dip that will allow the water to flow across the trail.				
Plant aspen and wetland shrubs	0.5 acres	Plant 10 aspen trees and 10 wetland shrubs of various native species				

The proposed action falls within the Blue Jay/Duhring intensive use area, as defined in the Forest Plan, where ATV use is a suitable activity. It also falls within portions of the forest managed for late structural linkages (Management Area 2.2) and even-aged management (Management Area 3.0). The activities proposed here are consistent with Forest Plan direction, and all applicable standards and guidelines will be implemented. The trail has been laid out to minimize the construction of new crossings of water features and wetlands. Where these features are crossed, the crossings will be designed to minimize impacts by using best management practices that reduce sedimentation, allow for free flow and aquatic passage, and prevent channelization. Impacts to the wetland would be minimized by using the existing abandoned railroad grade that crosses the wetland, harden the trail surface in this location using limestone or paver blocks, and installing culverts or free draining material that allows for the movement of water through the abandoned railroad grade. Federal and State permitting will be obtained for the wetland and watercourse crossings, as well as for the wetland enhancement activities.

To be more specific about Forest Plan direction, the guidelines in Section 2500 (Watershed and Air, pages 72-79) applicable to this project proposal are addressed as follows:

- Riparian Corridor, Guideline (page 75): Avoid construction of new facilities, roads, oil and gas developments, motorized trails, landings and buildings within the riparian corridor (see Table 24).
- Wetlands, including Springs, Seeps and Vernal Pools, Guideline (page 78): Construction of new facilities, roads, oil and gas developments, motorized trails, landings, and buildings should occur outside of the wetland management zone. When wetlands cannot be avoided, impacts to wetland ecology should be minimized following these guidelines:
 - Roads and trails should be designed and constructed to avoid directing surface runoff into wetlands.
 - Crossings should be located at the narrowest point of the wetlands and should not constrict flow or cause channelization of wetlands.
 - All fills in wetlands should be constructed of free draining granular material.
 - Roads should be constructed upslope of wetlands, seeps or springs at a distance sufficient to avoid disturbing the subsurface flow. When roads must pass below springs or seeps, they should pass at a point where the flow goes below ground or where a defined channel permits the least damage.

For the most part, the proposed route follows existing roads, trails and embankments. For the segment of trail east of Watson Farm Road, the two stream crossings and wetland crossing in between them were the most problematic. Several alternatives were considered.

- A route to the north that avoided crossing the Watson Branch tributary and utilized Forest Road 445, would still need to cross Watson Branch and another tributary in areas without any previous disturbance, and would involve traversing steeper terrain.
- Another route that crossed the tributary further north from the proposed location (and avoid the proposed wetland crossing) would pass through several hundred feet of lowland conifers.

- A route to the south that avoided crossing the Watson Branch tributary would have to cross the Watson Branch in a wide riparian zone.
- Still another route to the south that utilized the two proposed stream crossings and would avoid the proposed wetland crossing looked promising; but a soils investigation revealed wetland plants and hydric soils that extend all the way to the Watson Branch, and this route would impact previously undisturbed portions of the wetland.

The proposed location meets the Forest Plan guidelines cited above for Riparian Corridors and Wetlands as follows:

The proposed location crosses two streams in previously disturbed locations and presents an opportunity to remove existing constrictions on both streams and restore function in the riparian corridor. Installing bank full stream crossing structures that allow for aquatic organism passage and pH-buffering limestone surfacing and ditch rock on the approaches would mitigate effects of the trail and crossings and potentially provide an opportunity to enhance water quality.

The proposed location crosses a wetland along an existing embankment that currently restricts surface water flow. Installing water diversion structures to allow free flow of surface water without diminishing wetland function and constructing vernal pools with sunning structures will enhance habitat for amphibians and create opportunities for viewing wildlife and interpreting this resource for the public. Constructing the segment of trail that crosses the wetland with permeable paver blocks and granular material will stabilize the surface, prevent widening of the trail by users, and diminish potential for erosion.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

We will consider public comments and determine if the proposed action may affect resources to the point where an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement must be prepared. If so, the appropriate type of analysis will be conducted. If not, we will likely exclude the project from further documentation using the following categorical exclusions:

- construction or reconstruction of trails (36 C.F.R. § 220.6(e)(1));
- restoring wetlands, streams, riparian areas or other water bodies (36 C.F.R. § 220.6(e)(18)); and
- minor special uses requiring less than 5 contiguous acres of National Forest System land (36 C.F.R. § 220.6(e)(3)) (for road decommissioning).

The Forest Service conducted a resource review of the proposed route to determine if there were any resource impacts that would require mitigation or route adjustment. Following the resource review, the Forest Service finalized the proposed connecting route. The trail segments are described above, and the proposed action includes these considerations:

- Anticipated effects to historic properties will be assess in the project cultural resource report.
- Anticipated effects to federally listed threatened or endangered species or Regional

Forester sensitive species will be assessed in the project biological evaluation/assessment.

- The two perennial stream crossings are in locations where crossings had existed in the past. The proposed action is to install a bridge (Watson Run) or bridge or structural plate arch (unnamed tributary of Watson Run) that facilitate bank full stream flow and aquatic organism passage.
- The four intermittent stream crossings are in locations where the proposed crossings would minimize impacts to the stream. The proposed action would install squashed metal culverts, if necessary, to facilitate bank full stream flow and aquatic organism passage.
- The proposed action would restrict access to approximately 1.635 miles of forest roads that are currently open to the public for motor vehicle use. The 1.635 miles of road (a 1.49-mile of Forest Road 221 and the 0.145-mile length of Forest Road 221C) would be open for hunter access from October to mid-January and closed to motor vehicles during spring break-up and during the ATV/OHM operating season (when it would be restricted to ATV/OHM use and administrative use).
- The proposed action would re-align the crossing at Blue Jay Road for ATV/OHMs and snowmobiles to make safer for all users.
- The proposed action would utilize a 2.6-mile portion of the Penoke OHM Trail; however, this segment is also part of the snowmobile trail system and is already widened to accommodate a snowmobile groomer. This segment normally accommodates two-way snowmobile traffic and is the only segment of the Penoke OHM trail that currently meets the trail width objectives for the ATV connector.
- The proposed action crosses a private oil and gas road between the wetland crossing and the Watson Branch crossing. The Forest Service will work with the subsurface owner to restrict motor vehicles from using this road. Options could include signing to identify the road as closed to motorized use and reminding operators to stay on the trail or physical restrictions such as installing gates on the road along each side of the trail.
- The proposed action by-passes Forest Road 395, which leads to the Rocket John Trailhead. While safe crossing of State Route 66 is possible at this location, the only viable route to the Rocket John Trailhead is along approximately 1.65 miles of Forest Road 395, an open and well-used Forest Service road. This would require dual-use on a narrow road with limited sight-distance. Given these concerns, a safer option was developed to connect to the Marienville ATV Trailhead.
- The proposed action crosses State Route 66 just within the northern edge of the Blue Jay/Duhring Intensive Use Area, where it connects with the Marienville ATV Trailhead. The remainder of the proposed action lies well within the intensive use area.

HOW TO COMMENT

If you would like to comment on this project, please submit your comments in one of the following ways no later than December 20, 2019:

By Mail: Rob Fallon, District Ranger
Allegheny National Forest
Marienville Ranger District
131 Smokey Lane
Marienville, PA 16239

By Fax: 814-927-6628

By Email: comments-eastern-allegheny-marienville@usda.gov. Please enter the project name (*Marienville ATV Connector and Wetland Enhancement Project*) on the subject line and include your name and physical mailing address with your comments.

In-Person or Telephone: Comments may be provided in-person at the Marienville Ranger District, 131 Smokey Lane, Marienville, PA 16239. Comments may also be provided by calling 814-927-6628. Normal business hours are 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Please note that any comments received, including the names and addresses of those who submit comments, will be part of the public record and available for public inspection.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about this project, please feel free to contact Kevin Treese, Planning Team Leader, at (814) 927-5759 or kevin.treese@usda.gov or review the documents posted to our website at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52264.